

New cases, hospitalizations, and deaths have been declining. The CDC reports that one in five adult Americans has already received at least one vaccine dose. That is 50-plus million people. One in 10 has gotten both shots. And the supply of vaccines is continuing to ramp up with yet another authorized just last weekend.

Meanwhile, science keeps confirming it is quite safe to get kids and teachers back in the classroom with simple precautions that we can accomplish right now. All indications suggest our economy is poised for a roaring comeback for workers and for families.

This crossroads should give Washington a golden opportunity. We could get together on a bipartisan basis like we did five times last year—five times—and pass more targeted policies to help finish the fight and get the American people their jobs, their schools, their lives, and their country back.

A number of Senate Republicans went to the White House just days after President Biden was sworn in, proposing we continue the streak of overwhelming bipartisanship that has designed the COVID-19 response all this time. Our Democratic colleagues said no; they wanted to go it alone. And when you look at their partisan bill, you can certainly see why.

Less than 9 percent of their massive proposal would go to the core healthcare fight against COVID-19. Listen to this: Less than 1 percent goes to vaccinations.

You see, they had to leave room for all the completely unrelated, leftwing pet priorities, like sending \$350 billion to bail out long-mismanaged State and local governments, multiple times the expert estimate of COVID needs; things like massive expansion and ObamaCare subsidies that would disproportionately benefit wealthier people; things like handcrafted tweaks to Medicare so it pays more money to just three States: Rhode Island, New Jersey, and the President's home State of Delaware. You might call it a special kick-back for the Acela Corridor.

They had to make room to bankroll things like underground rail in Silicon Valley, upgrading a bridge from New York to Canada, and giving Planned Parenthood access to taxpayer money meant to rescue mom-and-pop Main Street businesses.

Sadly, the parts that actually do relate to the pandemic aren't much better. At the same time that Democrats refuse to follow the science on in-person schooling, they want to pass a massive new set of deluxe benefits for Federal Government employees, including 15 weeks of paid vacation for folks whose children have the option—just the option—of virtual or even hybrid learning.

They want to keep schools closed and then pay a special bonus only to parents who are Federal employees because—because their schools are closed.

Now, this isn't a recipe to safely reopen America. To the degree that it even addresses the pandemic, it is more like a plan to keep it shut down.

Mostly, it is just what Democrats promised almost a year ago: taking advantage of the crisis to check off unrelated liberal policies.

IRAN

Mr. McCONNELL. Now, Mr. President, on another matter, we recently learned that Iran has balked at the prospect of direct nuclear negotiations with the United States and Europe. This sort of resistance and gamesmanship is nothing new. We have seen this before.

Iran has long flouted international restrictions on its nuclear program, played hide-and-seek with U.N. inspectors, and failed to disclose the full scope of its nuclear research. This happened before, during, and after the Obama administration's Iran deal.

Now, thanks to the firm approach taken by the Republican administration which restored much of the leverage President Obama had thrown away, President Biden inherited a much, much stronger negotiating position.

Let me make it clear. Republicans do not oppose nuclear diplomacy. We hope the administration will secure a better, stronger, and more lasting deal than President Obama's, but to do so, President Biden's team must avoid the mistakes of the JCPOA.

Here is how you do that: coordinate closely with the partners and allies who are most immediately threatened by Tehran; treat Congress as a partner to be consulted, not a problem to be managed; and, most importantly, don't give up any leverage for free.

Of course the mullahs are playing coy. They want concessions before they even come to the table. In December, after President Biden was elected, Iran's Parliament reaffirmed their intent to continue acting out if sanctions were not eased.

Well, I hope it is only the Iranians and not the administration's negotiators who need this reminder: Look, the United States holds all the cards. President Biden is the Commander in Chief of a superpower. There are no circumstances—none—in which Iran should get money for nothing. And there is no need to rush into the talks.

The administration should take care not to squander our upper hand just to spite the last administration, nor should President Biden's team discount the value of the growing regional unity against Iran that is embodied in the new Abraham Accords.

Every day, headlines remind the world of the threat Iran and its proxies pose to peace and security. For example, the Iranian journalist, Ruhollah Zam, was lured back to the region from Europe, kidnapped, and hanged after a sham trial just in December.

The Lebanese activist, Lokman Slim, was an outspoken critic of Hezbollah until he was shot dead in his car.

The regime has kept escalating its support of the Houthis rebels in Yemen, sending in deadlier, longer range weapons, and inciting terrorist threats.

The Houthis have escalated attacks on Yemen's neighbors, including in civilian areas, and launched a military offensive that jeopardizes the peace negotiations being undertaken by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths.

Just last week, an Israeli civilian shipping vessel pulled into port with gaping damage from a missile attack, and Tehran's pet militias in Iraq have fired rocket barrages against our own American diplomatic and military facilities. They are communicating to the Biden administration in the mullahs' preferred language: violence.

Like I said over the weekend, President Biden is right to respond to this threat by authorizing strikes against targets belonging to Iranian proxy groups—the right decision—and he is right to recognize the need for new binding and enforceable constraints on Iran's nuclear capabilities, but, ultimately, we need a comprehensive approach to confronting Iran. It must be built on bipartisan foundations to endure for administrations and Congresses yet to come.

To get there—to get there, the administration must continue to meet Iranian aggression from a position of strength and consult closely with Congress for the sake of our own security and that of our friends and partners in the Ayatollah's backyard.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PADILLA). Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nomination of Gina Marie Raimondo, of Rhode Island, to be Secretary of Commerce.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I have come to the floor, on several occasions now, to talk about this \$1.9 trillion spending bill that will be soon before this body.

I have talked about different parts of the bill on different occasions. I have talked about the mandates, the bailouts, and the billions and billions of dollars of spending completely unrelated to coronavirus. Now, these are all reasons enough to oppose this piece of legislation.

Today, I would like to talk about another problem that I see with the bill,

and that is that this bill would now subsidize health insurance far beyond what was ever imagined when the House and the Senate passed the Obama healthcare law—way beyond the subsidies ever envisioned in that.

One analysis shows that this bill would give a family of four making close to a quarter million dollars a year—family of four making close to a quarter million dollars a year—up to \$9,000 in free subsidies for healthcare.

Now, that is not four times the poverty level; that is almost four times the average income of a household in the United States.

You know, government aid is supposed to be for those who need it, people who can't make it on their own, but that has not been the focus of the Democrats with this legislation.

This legislation is not about coronavirus, not about coronavirus testing and vaccinations. They have already been paid for, so that someone who wants to get a test or get the vaccine, they get it. It was paid for previously. The vaccines are free. We don't need additional money to pay for the shot. We voted on that last year. It is the law of the land.

This new proposal, with these additional subsidies, is just going to get us this much closer to one-size-fits-all, socialized medicine.

Now, Democrats have realized for many years that the Obama healthcare law has failed America. They know it is unaffordable for working families. People understand that the copays are so high, the deductibles are so high that people who have been mandated to buy it found that they didn't really get any value for their money.

Many people I have talked to said, with ObamaCare, the premiums were so high it was actually higher than their mortgage at home.

Well, Republicans want to lower healthcare costs, actually the cost of care. Democrats seem to just want to raise what government pays.

And Democrats are also trying to pressure States to expand Medicaid. There are about a dozen States that have chosen not to expand Medicaid.

Now, I am a doctor. I know the importance of Medicaid. I know the importance of providing care for people who cannot care for themselves. Often, that is families, low-income families, pregnant women, patients with disabilities. You look at the original intent of Medicaid—huge value for the American people but not what they have seen with the ObamaCare expansion.

We should work together for these most vulnerable of individuals so that they can get the care that they need. Yet it is not what Democrats are doing with this proposal, not with the additional subsidies, not with the additional expansion of Medicaid. They are trying to bribe States—bribe States to give free care to able-bodied, working adults; not to people who were originally intended to be helped by Medicaid but for able-bodied, working adults.

Those are people who ought to be getting their health insurance through their job, through work. That is the best way this works for them, insurance that they can use without these extraordinarily high deductibles and copays that we see with ObamaCare. The contrast could not be clearer.

Republicans are offering the American people a stronger economy and opening schools. That is what we ought to be focusing on. Democrats and the healthcare law are subsidizing health insurance for the rich. It is astonishing. You wouldn't think it would be that way. It doesn't make sense. It is not coronavirus relief.

People need relief now. They want their kids back in school. They want to get back to work. They want to put the virus behind them. That is not what I see in this \$1.9 trillion bill that the Senate will soon be considering.

I think only 1 dollar out of 11 of this \$1.9 trillion bill actually goes to help get people back to work, kids back to school, focuses on the healthcare components of coronavirus.

The kids-back-to-school component, you say: Well, there is money to put kids back to school, but 95 percent of that money doesn't even start to get spent until 2022. The coronavirus crisis is going to be behind us by 2022.

We should be working together, targeting support for the American people who need it the most, not subsidizing people who don't actually need the subsidies.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Republican whip.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, Democrats continue to push forward with their partisan COVID legislation. The House of Representatives passed the Democrats' \$1.9 trillion partisan wish list on Saturday, and the Senate is expected to take it up later this week.

Just weeks after the President expressed his commitment to unity at his inauguration, he and his party are forcing through exclusively partisan legislation despite Republicans' clear willingness to negotiate. When it comes to Democrats' COVID bill, President Biden keeps asking, "What would you have me cut?"—as if there is no way anyone could dispute the necessity of anything in this legislation.

Well, as I said last week, I have some suggestions because this bill is rife with unnecessary and problematic provisions. Democrats are presenting this as a COVID relief bill, but a lot of this bill has little to do with responding to the pandemic. In fact, less than 10 percent of the bill is directly related to combating the COVID health crisis.

If President Biden would like to know what to cut, let me suggest starting with the bill's \$350 billion slush fund for States. Now, there is no question that COVID has placed additional pressure on States, which is why Republicans supported targeted funding for States in previous COVID legislation. But at this point, the vast majority of States are not in crisis.

A number of States actually saw higher tax revenues in 2020. The majority of States, including my home State of South Dakota, have the resources they need to weather the rest of the pandemic. Even if the Federal Government bailed out those States that are still struggling—some, at least partially, because of their own mismanagement—\$350 billion far exceeds the amount that would be needed. Democrats are simply providing a large and unnecessary giveaway to States with the distribution formula heavily weighted in favor of blue States.

Then there is the bill's funding for schools. Now, Republicans are committed to getting schools reopened so our kids can get back to the in-person learning that they need. It is why we voted for \$68 billion in COVID funding for K-12 schools last year. But right now, schools don't need additional funding. So far K-12 schools have spent just \$5 billion of the \$68 billion that we provided them. Yet the Democrats' bill would provide nearly \$129 billion in additional funding. And despite all that additional and unnecessary money, nothing—nothing—in the bill would require schools to actually reopen. Schools could collect this money while still depriving students of the benefits of in-person learning.

And another thing, Democrats are billing this legislation as a COVID relief bill and suggesting that it is providing urgently needed funding. Yet 95 percent of the funding for schools—95 percent—would be spent after this year. That is right. Just 5 percent of this "emergency funding" would be spent in 2021. The rest would be spent between 2022 and 2028. Are we really supposed to believe that money that would be spent in 2028—years after the pandemic is likely to be over—is somehow urgently needed COVID relief funding?

Well, I could go on for a while here with suggestions for what to cut in this bill. I am pretty sure that \$100 million for a Silicon Valley underground rail project doesn't have a lot to do with getting our country out of the COVID crisis. Or how about the \$1.5 million for a bridge in the Democratic leader's home State?

And then there is the \$86 billion bailout for multiemployer pension plans, billions—billions—for environmental policies, and a provision to ensure that Planned Parenthood and labor unions can apply for Paycheck Protection Program loans designed to help small businesses—I am not sure how far that will go toward helping our economy,

but it will certainly help build the coffers of some of Democrats' political allies.

If Democrats were really just focused on COVID relief, this would be a much smaller and targeted bill, but Democrats' ambitions were much larger than just addressing the COVID crisis. As a Democrat political operative famously said, "never allow a good crisis to go to waste."

Well, Democrats have taken that advice and are using the COVID crisis as cover for a whole list of partisan priorities with potentially very negative consequences. The Democrats' COVID bill runs a very real risk of overstimulating the economy, as evidenced by the large increase we have seen in money supply which could, among other things, drive up prices on the goods that Americans use every day—in other words, inflation. Even some liberal economists have sounded the alarm over the size of the Democrats' coronavirus legislation.

And then, of course, there is the danger posed by driving up our debt. We had to borrow a lot of money last year to meet the demands of the coronavirus crisis, and while it was money we needed to borrow, we need to be very aware of the fact that we added a substantial—substantial—amount to our already very large national debt. We need to be very careful about any additional borrowing and ensure that we are only borrowing what is absolutely necessary.

I think it goes without saying that the more that we borrow, the more debt we have to retire. If something negative happened on interest rates and interest rates normalized—went back to a more normal setting—the interest itself on that amount of debt would literally dwarf anything else we do in our budget, including defending the country.

And that, I believe, is a very, very real threat, because if you look at what is happening right now with the economy and with all the money that we have flooded out there so far and another \$2 trillion, if the Democrats have their way in this particular proposal, and all that money out there starts pushing up those costs and we start seeing inflation in the economy, it doesn't take very long for interest rates to go with it. In fact, they already are. If those interest rates start pushing up very quickly on the amount of debt that we are piling up, financing that debt—the amount of interest, the cost of interest on that debt—would be absolutely overwhelming and devastating to this country.

So we need to be very, very careful about any additional borrowing and ensure that we are only borrowing what is absolutely necessary. That means making sure that anything we do in terms of additional pandemic relief is targeted and fiscally responsible, and that does not include money for a bridge in New York or a taxpayer bailout for mismanaged States.

It is deeply disappointing that Democrats chose to turn their backs on bipartisanship. Republicans were ready to work with Democrats on additional targeted relief.

As I have pointed out before, the pandemic has been an issue on which, at least up until now, there has been very much bipartisan support. Last year, when Republicans were in the majority, we did five—five—coronavirus bills, all bipartisan, all done at the 60-vote threshold that governs most legislation that moves through the Senate in a cooperative way.

In this case, the Democrats are plowing forward, pushing this legislation in a very partisan way, and I think that is unfortunate given our history on this issue of bipartisanship and the importance of making sure that we are doing the right things on behalf of the American people to help them get through this pandemic.

Choosing to pursue a partisan process allows Democrats to stuff the bill with unnecessary spending and political payoffs, but that is not the way to help our country or our economy recover.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NOMINATION OF GINA MARIE RAIMONDO

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to urge my colleagues to support President Biden's nominee to be Secretary of Commerce, the Governor of Rhode Island, Gina Raimondo.

Many people know that Governor Raimondo was the first woman to serve in that position in her State, and she has made tremendous impacts to that State at a time when it needed important leadership. So we are very excited that the President has nominated her for this position and that she will put those same skill sets to work here in Washington.

The mission of the Department of Commerce, at least according to its website, is to foster, promote, and develop foreign and domestic commerce. Well, I can tell you that she is going to inherit a big challenge because obviously our domestic economy is still reeling from the impacts of COVID-19, and certainly she needs to think about the continuing transition to a digital economy in an information age. The foreign economy that she also will be charged with trying to help and impact as it relates to the United States is certainly plagued by the same pandemic and the impacts of that.

So we are looking for someone who can come in and help, with private sector experience, to really move the agenda of this administration forward. For me, Governor Raimondo's private

sector experience really means a lot. She knows how to invest in new technologies and things that are going to help us grow jobs for the future, and she knows how to match up a workforce with those job opportunities that are also so critical as we move forward on many, many different policy issues that are going to usher in change.

As Governor, she invested in workforce training and matching workers with relevant small business experience, called her Rhode Island job initiative. The program served more than 1,700 employers and 11,000 people throughout the State. She was able to send her State's unemployment rates tumbling to a 30-year low simply by doing a really focused job of matching workforce training to the needs of those industries that were growing in her State. So I certainly appreciate the fact that she has that private sector experience in knowing where to invest and bringing people together, and she certainly created successful programs on matching the workforce for tomorrow.

But make no mistake, the Department of Commerce is going to have a very challenging role as we try to deal with the impacts of COVID-19. One of the most important responsibilities, I believe, will be dealing with the sectors most hard hit by the COVID pandemic.

I am glad that Governor Raimondo is a Governor of a coastal State because one of the most impacted industries, as we have seen, is the seafood industry, which has been affected greatly by COVID-19 since early January 2020 when the lockdowns in China and around the world impacted the seafood sector. U.S. seafood exports to China dropped by 31 percent by January of 2020 and 40 percent by February of 2020. Lobster, Dungeness crab, shellfish—everything was experiencing severe declines, and west coast fisheries have seen as much as a 40-percent drop in revenue.

Sustainable fisheries are important economic drivers in coastal communities. I know that Governor Raimondo gets that. She understands that commercial fishermen and the impacts they have will impact not just seafood processors, shipbuilding, and trade, but also our restaurant economy. Marine anglers took in more than 194 million fishing trips, which fueled our outdoor recreation and tourism economy.

So I am glad that Governor Raimondo, from a coastal State, is going to come to oversee some of those key functions at the Department of Commerce, particularly at NOAA, and harness the incredible data and information that help us manage these economies, that keep them safe and keep them focused on science. I know she understands that, as Secretary, she can use those good scientific Agencies within the Department of Commerce to better understand the impacts of climate and the impacts of COVID and what we can do.

We know in the State of Washington that just a little bit of science done at